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GOARCH Insanity: Female Servers, Readers & Deaconesses?

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By Subdeacon Nektarios, M.A.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, under the episcopal authority of the Heresiarch Archbishop, Elpidophoros Ioannis Lambriniadis, who is "depart[ing] from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy," (1st Timothy 4:1-2) in yet another misguided action, is drawing itself away from Holy Orthodoxy and further into their own Greco-Papocaesarism by now trying to introduce into the entire jurisdiction female altar servers, female tonsured-ordained readers, and a "revival" of female deaconesses. According to a private resolution that was discovered and submitted to the Metropolis of New Jersey's Clergy-Laity Assembly, Elpidophoros is seeking to, "develop the role of women and girls in the life of the contemporary Orthodox Church in America [...] involving girls in processions and other liturgical service during liturgy, serving as acolytes, and reading of the Epistle; tonsuring of female students as readers and blessing them to serve in the altar at HCHC (Hellenic College - Holy Cross) [and] reviving the female diaconate" [1].



Females dressed as Subdeacons carrying liturgical fans

Originally leaked through the Greek Confessors of Orthodoxy at Helleniscope.com in their article entitled As the “Gay Plan” Failed, The Archbishop Now Tries Plan B: Women in the Sanctuary!, the news broke about how Elpidophoros and company are trying to slide this innovation into the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. In another article from OrthoChristian.com concerning the same topic they gave a little more background into Elpidophoros' involvement saying, "Elpidophoros had a discussion in November on 'expanding the participation of women in the Church' with several [pseudo] scholars including the Archons Cary J. Limberakis and George Demacopoulos. 'The Archbishop explained that the dominant problem is the false notion that only men are allowed within the sanctuary'" [2].

However, we have to ask ourselves, is this a factual statement that can be trusted, coming from Lambriniadis who has time and again been caught violating canons and speaking in a forked-tongued manner? We can examine a few Church texts to determine if this is in fact a false notion or if it is the more than likely fact that women are not permitted to fill these roles according to the canons and other authoritative texts in the Church. First, we can examine the subject of women serving in the altar in general and who is permitted to serve there. A simple look into the canons we can find Canon LXIX (69) of the Council of Trullo which states,

"It is not permitted to a layman to enter the sanctuary (Holy Altar, Gk.), though, in accordance with a certain ancient tradition, the imperial power and authority is by no means prohibited from this when he wishes to offer his gifts to the Creator" [3].

So, here we see in no uncertain terms, that laymen (laywomen) are *not* permitted to enter the holy of holies, except for the imperial authority, i.e. the Roman (Byzantine) Emperor. The only exception being is the churching of infant children. During the liturgical churching of male infants, they are brought through the deacons' door and into the altar and back out, whereas, infant females are brought to the royal doors outside of the iconostasis. In the book of needs, the rubrics for the priest state, "And, if the child be a male, he brings him into the holy altar (but if the child be a female, only as far as the royal doors." [4] In this canon alone we can see that this automatically would prohibit woman from serving in the altar since women cannot serve within any of ranks of the clergy (readers, subdeacons, deacons, priests, bishops) which were handed down to us by Holy Tradition. Continuing on in the canons, the Council of Laodicea, in its 44th canon states again, without explanation, and again in no uncertain terms that, "Women may not go to the altar" [4]. Furthermore, the famous canonist and Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Theodore Balsamon says concerning Canon XLIV (44) of the Council of Laodicea that, "'Among the Latins women go without any shame up to the altar whenever they wish" [5].

However, a commentary rebuttal by Belgian canonist and papist priest Zeger Bernhard van Espen in defending his papal confession says concerning Patriarch Theodore Balsamon's comment on Canon XLIV that, "the discipline of this canon was often renewed even in the Latin Church [...] For the Latins have forbidden and *do forbid this approach of women to the altar no less than the Greeks*; and look upon the contrary custom as an abuse sprung of the insolence of the women and of the negligence of bishops and pastors" [6]. What is interesting about these two statements is that we have an Orthodox Christian canonist and patriarch from the 12th century and a Belgian papal canonist from 18th century saying exactly the same thing, which is, women in most common cases are not permitted within the altar to serve in any capacity; which gives us some historical insight that this was not a part of the tradition either in the East or in the West, among the Orthodox or even among the Papists until their recent innovations at Vatican II.

Now that a cursory examination of the Holy Canons has been undertaken and shown that laymen, much less women, are not permitted into the altar to serve, we come to the topic of ordained readers, often mistakenly referred to as "tonsured" readers [7]. So, who can be ordained a reader? To briefly cover this, we again can look to the canons which give us a very clear picture of who the Church has in mind when it comes to the eligibility of being ordained a reader. This clear picture can be seen because of the rules contained in other canons that are set in place for those in these clerical ranks. For example, Canon XXV (25) of the Two-Hundred and Seventeen Blessed Fathers who assembled at Carthage in 419 AD calls for all ranks of the clergy to include readers to abstain from their wives for a time when serving the altar. Now, despite the trend circulating among the Fordhamites, Demacopoulos, and San Fillipo circles we know as *true* Orthodox Christians that only biological men can have wives.

Continuing on to the texts of the Church with one which obviously cannot be overlooked is the ordination text of a layman to the clerical rank of reader. Within the liturgical text for the ordination of a reader, on the day of the tonsuring and ordination of the reader, following the Great Doxology but before the Troparion and before the Divine Liturgy, the candidate is led by the Bishop's Assistants (traditionally Subdeacons) to the center of the solea in front of the Bishop. He makes three prostrations toward the Holy Altar. Then, he turns and makes one prostration toward the Bishop and stops on his knees. The Bishop lays his hand on the candidate's head saying the rite of ordination of a reader in no uncertain terminology, or in any obscure or confusing language, which concludes with the bishop saying,

"My Son (name), the first degree of the Priesthood is that of Reader. It behooveth thee, therefore, to peruse the divine Scriptures daily, to the end that the hearers, regarding thee, may receive edification, that thou, in nowise shaming Thine election, mayest prepare thyself for a higher degree. For by a chaste, holy and upright life thou shalt gain the favor of the God of loving kindness and shalt render thyself worthy of a greater ministry, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory unto ages of ages, Amen" [8].

As the text of the ordination itself describes this office as the first degree of the priesthood, the reader at his ordination puts on the little phelonion, signifying his assuming an office within the ranks of the clergy and reminding the ordained to not shame his office that he may prepare for a higher degree within the ranks of the clergy. To become any rank of clergy within the Orthodox Church you must have become an ordained reader before you may be elevated to anything else.

Of course those modernist detractors want to sweep under the rug the relevant canons prohibiting laymen (and specifically females) from entering the altar and from being ordained readers. They will also raise the renovationist war cry of the long extinct "female diaconate" without actually knowing what the female diaconate is, the vague history that revolves around them, and the real reason that the Church ceased to make women deaconesses. They will often falsely think that women deaconesses were just the female version of the male deacon, serving in a liturgical role, but that is far from the historical truth of the matter. Unfortunately, this subject is so extensively large that it cannot be covered in its entirety in this short article.

However, fortunately for us, this topic has been extensively researched by Protodeacon Dr. Brian Patrick Mitchell, PhD, from the Russian Church Abroad Cathedral in Washington, D.C., who is the foremost subject matter expert on this topic. Father Deacon Patrick in his must-read book entitled, *The Disappearing Deaconess: Why the Church Once Had Deaconesses and Then Stopped Having Them* gives an exegesis on the subject of the female diaconate and details the history of the presumed origins of this office, the canons, church fathers that spoke of them and explains why although it is part of the history of the Church, it is not the tradition of the Church. In addition to this critical volume, he has also given us a very detailed synopsis of this book entitled, *Deacons and Deaconesses Why the Church Kept One and Not the Other*.

As we can see from the various liturgical texts and canons of the Church, women are not called to serve liturgically in the Church and they are not called by God into the ranks of the clergy. Elpidophoros knows this and his public statements are blatant lies to the faithful. What also must be asked is, why is there outrage all of a sudden that Elpidophoros is trying to implement this? He is not the first to do this within the Orthodox Church or even within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. On June 8th, 2003 at Saint Paul Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine, California, "with a hierarchical Liturgy presided over by Metropolitan Anthony of San Francisco, together with Father Steven Tsichlis and all the previous assistant priests who had served at St. Paul's: Fathers Jim Pappas, Martin Ritsi, Dean Kouldukis, John Konugres and Timothy Robinson [...] Eve Tibbs was tonsured as a reader/chantor by Metropolitan Anthony" [10]. I came upon this information personally in 2010 at St. Katherine College in Encinitas, California, during the college's inaugural Orthodox Christian Theology 101 course taught by Eve Tibbs where we vigorously debated this modernist innovation.

This, however, is not the only instance when this has happened in the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, the use of female altar servers is not at all an uncommon thing within the Patriarchate of Antioch in the Middle East. Within the Church in Syria and even at the Orthodox Church in Dubai, UAE, the sight of non-canonical female altar servers who are usually dressed as subdeacons is rather frequent and we can even see liturgies in which Patriarch John X himself is present. So the question again is, why the outrage now? These modernist innovations and liturgical abuses have been going on in the Church for a very long time and it is because the faithful of the Church have, until now, turned a blind eye. As I have said in the past, it is time for the laity to stand up and defend their Church from these modernist and heretical clergy and "stand fast, and hold to the traditions ye have been taught" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).



Eve Tibbs being tonsured a "reader" by Metropolitan Anthony of San Francisco in 2003.



References

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- [4]. "Prayers for Women on the 40th Day of Child Birth," in *The Book of Needs, Volume I*, (South Canaan: St Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2000), 10-15.
- [5]. Council of Laodicea, "The Canons of the Synod Held in the City of Laodicea in Phrygia Pacatiana, in which Many Blessed Fathers from Divers Provinces of Asia Were Gathered Together, Canon XLIV," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils Volume 14*, ed. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 396.
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- [7]. Council of Laodicea, "The Canons of the Synod Held in the City of Laodicea in Phrygia Pacatiana, in which Many Blessed Fathers from Divers Provinces of Asia Were Gathered Together, Canon XLIV," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils Volume 14*, ed. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 396.
- [8]. The Synod of Antioch in Encæniss, "The Canons of the Blessed and Holy Fathers Assembled at Antioch in Syria, Canon X," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils, Volume 14*, ed. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (Peabody: Hendrickson Publications, 1999), 113. Text: "The Holy Synod decrees that persons in villages and districts, or those who are called chorepiscopi (rural bishops) [...] may *ordain readers*, sub-deacons and exorcists."

[9]. "The Office of Setting-Apart of a Reader and a Chanter," in *The Book of Needs, Volume I*, (South Canaan: St Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2000). 238-242.

[10]. "Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of St. Paul's," St. Paul Greek Orthodox Church, accessed May 17th, 2023, <https://stpaulsirvine.org/parish-history/>